

# Ipswich Unitarians

## LIVING WITH THE MYSTERY: UNFINISHED TALES AND LOST ENDINGS

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Shortly after the death of Charles Dickens, the painter and illustrator, Robert William Buss, commenced work on a watercolour called, 'Dickens's Dream'. It shows Dickens seated pensively at his desk in Gad's Hill Place, his home in Kent. And around him, as a "cloud of witnesses", are characters from his books. But although all the figures are drawn, only a few have had the colours added. Among these are characters from Dickens's last novel, 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'.

The colours have not been added to the other Dickensian scenes and characters because Buss died before he could finish the picture. There is an irony here. Buss's unfinished painting adds colour only to characters from Dickens's unfinished novel.

'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' is, almost certainly, a murder mystery – although this is not yet apparent at the point where Dickens laid down his pen, never to pick it up again, in June 1870. So we not only have the mystery of Edwin Drood in the sense that we don't know how Dickens intended to complete a book that was probably less than half finished, we have the mystery of who murdered Edwin Drood – if, indeed, he had been murdered at all! It is all very intriguing.

The mystery is compounded by the appearance, in the later surviving chapters, of a mysterious figure called, Mr. Datchery. In the last chapter, having attended a service in Cloisterham (i.e. Rochester) Cathedral, to which comes, "a very small and straggling congregation indeed," Mr. Datchery returns to his lodgings for, "a very neat, clean breakfast." "And," having performed a mysterious exercise involving chalk and a cupboard door, he "falls to with an appetite." These, the last words that Dickens wrote, leave us all "with an appetite" to know how the story would have continued – and ended.

There is a darkness about the book, with its opium dens, its sexual infatuation, its sense of menace and incipient violence, that may well give an insight into Dickens's state of mind at this last stage of his life. We find in the character of choirmaster John Jasper an echo of the sinister Bradley Headstone in Dickens's previous novel, 'Our Mutual Friend'. Both are obsessed with a much younger woman, a teenage girl, an obsession that is self-destructing, potentially (or actually) murderous, and a terrible blight on the lives of others. It is hard not to see in these two characters something of a psychological self-analysis, by their creator, of his own dark side – something of which he was well aware. But because, 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' is unfinished, we will never know how that troubling self-examination was to end.

Since Dickens's death many attempts have been made to tidy the story up and give it an ending, most recently in the television adaptation by Gwyneth Hughes. But the truth is that, 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood', Dickens's unfinished masterpiece, will always remain a mystery, and maybe there's no harm in that. We live amidst mystery and we are each of us a mystery, even to ourselves, and learning to live with the mystery – rather than desperately trying to solve the insoluble – can save a lot of worry, time, and effort!

Dickens himself, in a passage from, 'The Chimes', writes of the subconscious: "Monsters uncouth and wild arise in premature, imperfect, resurrection." But then as consciousness returns after sleep, "every sense and object of the mind resumes its usual form and lives again..." He writes of the human mind that, for all its rational, ordering capacities, "...every man is every day

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the casket of this type of the Great Mystery.” That is to say, in its ability to bring order to the chaotic mysteries of the subconscious, the human mind is a reflection of the Divine, but the “Great Mystery” cannot itself be fully comprehended by our minds in their “caskets” of flesh. Dickens’s concept of God as the “Great Mystery” is a healthy antidote to all those religious dogmas, institutions, and individuals which claim to know exactly what God is, and regard anyone with a different opinion as a heretic or an infidel, to be censored, silenced, and even put to death.

Charles Dickens’s unfinished last novel is a literary mystery, but it is not the only one! And for Bible scholars, it may not even be the most interesting. Dickens was a liberal Christian, with a fairly sophisticated view of the Bible. But whether he was aware of what has been called, “the greatest of all literary mysteries,” I don’t know. This mystery relates to an unfinished book that Dickens must have read, and heard read, many times. And that is the gospel according to Saint Mark.

Mark’s gospel was the first to be written of the four that are included in the New Testament. It is also the shortest by some margin. It contains no account of the Nativity at its beginning, and never did, but it is its ending that is the “greatest mystery”. Although, if you look in your bibles, you will see that the final, sixteenth, chapter has twenty verses, Bible scholars are generally agreed that the last twelve of these are not part of Mark’s original gospel. Indeed, some don’t think that the last thirteen verses really belong.

The trouble has always been that the oldest manuscript evidence has Mark’s gospel ending either at verse seven or verse eight – or even halfway through it, which seems an odd place to end, with the women running away from the empty tomb, “trembling with amazement”, on Easter morning. The Resurrection has been announced to them by the angelic “young man” sitting in the tomb, who tells them, in verse seven, to say to the disciples that Jesus is, “going ahead of you into Galilee: there you will see him, as he told you.” But the first part of verse eight adds, rather incongruously, that the women, having run away, “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” There are no appearances by the risen Christ, which are such an important element in the other three gospels.

Mark’s gospel is almost certainly unfinished, unless Mark somehow meant to leave it all up in the air, but this seems an unlikely and unduly modern scenario. What happened? Did Mark, like Dickens, die before he could finish the book? Did his final verses get misplaced? Were they destroyed – accidentally or deliberately – before copies could be made? Was there meant to be a sequel – like Luke’s sequel to his gospel – that never got written? Nobody knows, and nobody is ever likely to know now, so the mystery of the lost ending to Mark’s gospel remains.

But, as with ‘Edwin Drood’, some people just couldn’t live with the mystery. The trouble was that Mark’s truncated, low key ending didn’t really fit with the teaching and preaching of the early Church, with its tremendous emphasis on the Resurrection. And so the ‘continuator’ got to work. Continutors are people who write endings to other people’s unfinished books. In the case of Mark’s gospel, there were probably several continuators.

Verse eight of chapter 16, or, at least, its second half, constitutes what scholars call the ‘short ending’. It provides the gospel with what the early Church regarded as a suitably upbeat ending, with “Jesus himself” sending out “the sacred and imperishable message of eternal salvation” by means of the disciples. But someone else – or possibly more than one – either didn’t think the ‘short ending’ was long enough, or just had their own idea, perhaps based on an independent

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tradition, of how to end the gospel. So we have the so-called 'long ending' of Mark, from verses nine to twenty. This, it must be said, is rather a hotch-potch, describing incidents involving the risen Christ. It is by no means without interest, it should be said, but it is not by Mark.

If we take Mark's gospel without the added endings, short or long, and finishing at verse seven (or halfway through verse eight), then we have a remarkably open-ended view of the Resurrection. Now, I have no more idea of Mark's intentions than anyone else, but I must say I rather like this open-ended conclusion and the idea it gives of a profound and amazing mystery – something that those continuators just couldn't live with!

Just as it is best to leave 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' as just that – a mystery to intrigue the imagination – so it is best to leave the conundrum of Mark's gospel's 'lost ending' to the interplay of mind, faith, and personal understanding. Mystery, including the Great Mystery, is the stuff of a tolerant, open-minded, belief-system. Certainty about the things that are not known, and can never be known, is not.

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